

Generalized Anxiety Disorder

Generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) is one of the most common mental health challenges experienced in the United States. According to the Anxiety and Depression Association of America, GAD affects 6.8 million adults, or 3.1% of the U.S. population, in any given year. While the exact cause of GAD is unknown, there is evidence that biological factors, family background, and life experiences, particularly stressful ones, play a role.

What is Generalized Anxiety Disorder?

GAD is a mental health concern that is characterized by excessive fear, worry, and behavioral disturbances. Some of the most common symptoms are:

- Persistent worrying or anxiety about a number of areas that are out of proportion to the impact of the events
- Overthinking plans and solutions to all possible worst-case outcomes
- Perceiving situations and events as threatening, even when they aren't
- Difficulty handling uncertainty
- Indecisiveness and fear of making the wrong decision
- Inability to set aside or let go of a worry
- Inability to relax, feeling restless, and feeling keyed up or on edge
- Difficulty concentrating, or the feeling that your mind "goes blank"

How Does Generalized Anxiety Disorder Develop?

Generalized anxiety occurs when an individual overestimates the probability and severity of danger, and underestimates their resources to cope with the danger. This is called the *risk/resource model*¹. Once this model is activated, people who suffer from anxiety become overly focused on the things they perceive as threats. This is called *hypervigilance*. Hypervigilance is driven by the belief that being attentive to potential threats can help you avoid these threats or cope with them better. Unfortunately, being overly focused on potential threats actually has the opposite affect. It prevents you from being able to accurately perceive how much danger there actually is in a situation, causes you to view neutral situations as threatening, makes you ignore signs of safety in your environment, interferes with your performance, and leads to physiological symptoms like an upset stomach, rapid heart rate, nausea, dizziness, or difficulty breathing.

¹ Clark, D. A., & Beck, A. T. (2011). *Cognitive therapy of anxiety disorders: Science and practice*. Guilford Press.

How Can CBT and Mindfulness Help With Generalized Anxiety Disorder?

CBT for anxiety focuses on helping you to reframe negative beliefs about your ability to cope with perceived danger in your environment. During therapy, your therapist will teach you how to identify the thoughts and beliefs that lead to your feelings of anxiety, and how to evaluate these thoughts using techniques such as Socratic questioning. Your therapist may also assign behavioral exercises to help you learn to tolerate distress you may experience when confronted with situations that cause you to feel anxious. These exercises may include imagining yourself in situations you typically avoid, or identifying small, incremental steps you can take to actually engage in these situations. These exercises will increase your confidence in your ability to cope with threatening outcomes and reduce your sense of uncertainty. For additional support, your therapist may also utilize mindfulness exercises such as deep breathing or meditation. Breathing exercises help you to be present in the here and now rather than focused on the future. They also reduce stress by making your body feel more like it does when it's already relaxed. For this reason, breathing exercises can be useful when you experience emotional extremes or have difficulty focusing on your thoughts. Similarly, mindfulness strategies can also help you focus on the present moment by providing a space for you to observe and let go of your negative thinking, while embracing more positive, values-focused thoughts.